

ASCUTNEY: A FRIENDLY MOUNTAIN

by MARJORIE HOOKER

AMONG THE SMALLER MOUNTAINS of New England are a few which, through a fortunate combination of characteristics and circumstances, merit more than passing consideration. They are the mountains which, in the course of years, have become not more widely known, but rather better known and liked in the small circle of their acquaintance. They are the hills that have achieved recognition not so much by reason of great height, difficult access, or majestic appearance, but more because they have attractive contours, splendid views, distinctive location, interesting history, or perhaps merely an individual and pleasing personality. One of these mountains is Ascutney in Vermont. Like many another small mountain, Ascutney is a focal point of the surrounding country and not only the physical history of the region, but the social history as well, has been associated with and influenced by the mountain.

Neither a part of the Green Mountains of Vermont nor the White Mountains of New Hampshire, Ascutney hugs the boundary between the two states along the west bank of the Connecticut River, from which point it overlooks the New Hampshire fields across the river to the east and those of Vermont to the north, west, and south. It is actually in eastern Vermont, about one third the length of the state, or fifty miles, north of the Vermont-Massachusetts boundary. The coordinates of the summit are $43^{\circ}26'37.7''$ north latitude and $72^{\circ}27'17.3''$ west longitude. The mountain lies in the three towns of Windsor, West Windsor, and Weathersfield, with the exact summit in West Windsor. On the Vermont side of the river, Windsor village lies three miles north, Ascutney village two miles south, and Claremont, the nearest village in New Hampshire, is seven miles southeast. Both Ascutney and Windsor are on U. S. Route 5, which parallels the Connecticut River.

The road to Brownsville, a village northwest of Ascutney, branches off from Route 5 at Windsor and skirts the northern slopes of the mountain. About a mile and a half beyond Brownsville the road again branches, the left fork continuing south along the base of the mountain through Ascutney Notch. From the notch, the road swings southeasterly toward Ascutney village five miles distant. Another five miles, from Ascutney to Windsor, along

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the river completes the circuit around the mountain. A shorter route can be followed by starting at Ascutney village and branching off to the west towards Brownsville about one mile north on Route 5. Either route is often referred to as the "water-level drive around the mountain" and furnishes an excellent panorama.

Ascutney Notch separates Ascutney Mountain from two smaller peaks abutting the southwestern side. Pierson Peak, the more northerly of the two, was named in 1903 by Reginald Daly of Harvard University while he was engaged in studying the geology of the region. He chose the name "after the hospitable owner of the farm at the base of the hill." The other peak is called Little Ascutney Mountain.

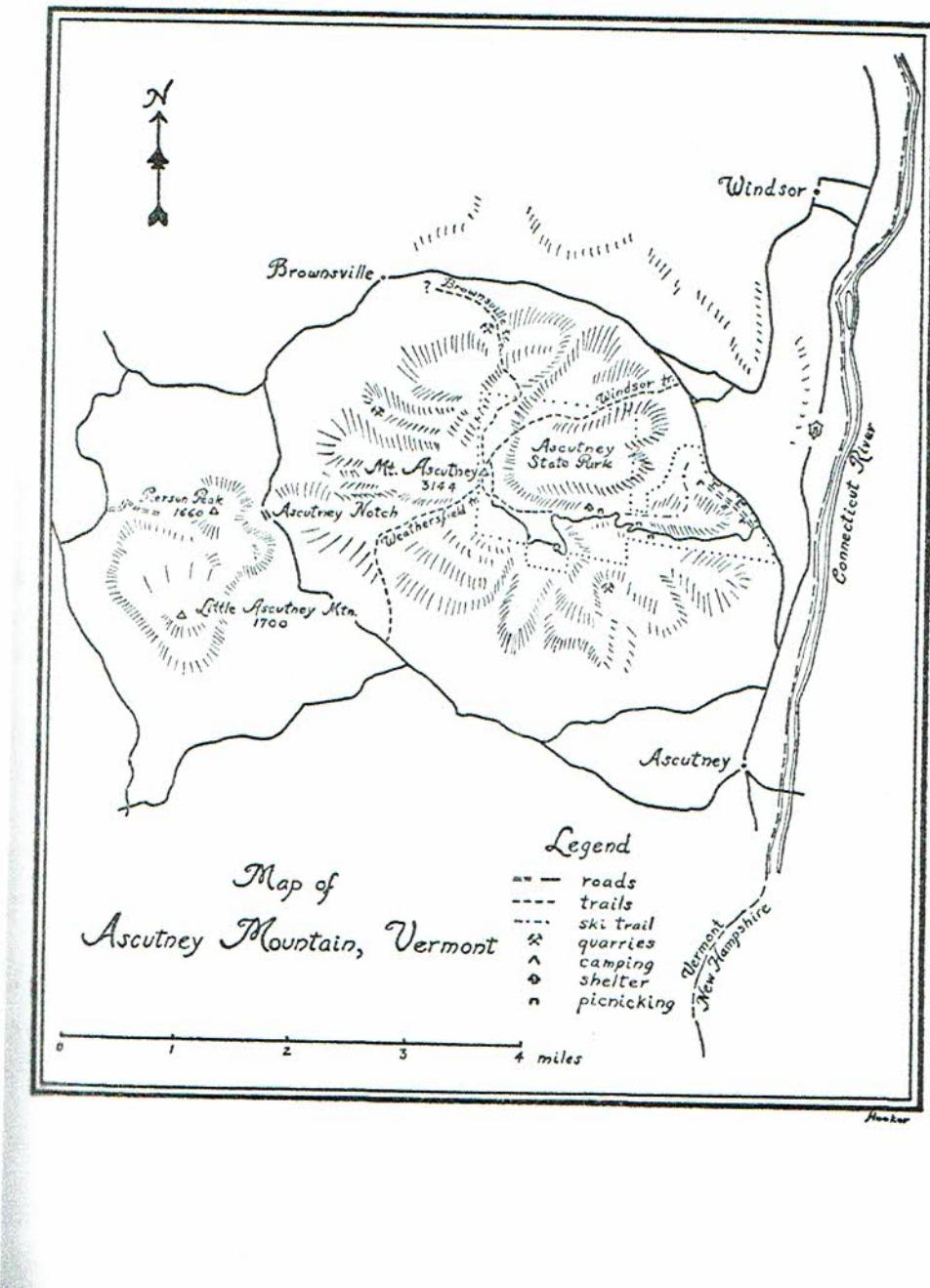
Ascutney is not a high mountain. Its altitude, estimated or computed at various times as 3,114; 3,168, or 3,320 feet, is now established at 3,144 feet. The summit is still well below timberline, and the evergreens and maples which grow in such profusion on its slopes also cover the broadly rounded top. But Ascutney seems higher than its comparatively low elevation, partly because of its isolated position, and partly because it rises from a relatively lower level than its neighboring mountains. The height of Ascutney above the valley floor is 2,844 feet, not much less than its height above sea level.

Ascutney Mountain has long been considered the highest point in the Connecticut Valley between the Connecticut Lakes and Long Island Sound. One hundred and ten miles north of Ascutney, the relatively unknown Monadnock Mountain of northeastern Vermont runs a very close second with an elevation of 3,140 feet. Curiously enough, Monadnock Mountain bears a marked likeness to Ascutney in more respects than altitude. It is approximately similar in size and shape, and occupies a corresponding position on the west bank of the Connecticut River.

Topping both Ascutney and Monadnock by more than 250 feet, however, are Teapot and Goback mountains, eleven miles south of Monadnock on the New Hampshire side but still within the valley, rising to 3,426 feet and 3,523 feet respectively. Despite the fact that Ascutney cannot hold unchallenged claim to being the highest point in the Connecticut Valley, it is at least a thousand feet higher than any point within a radius of many miles and that, coupled with the fact that it rises from a relatively low valley floor, makes it a landmark with a prominence unequaled by many a higher peak in either the Green or White mountains.

While it is generally believed that the word "Ascutney" is derived from the Indian, differences of opinion exist as to its meaning. Zadock Thompson in his *History of Vermont* (1853) says:

The name of this mountain is undoubtedly of Indian origin, but writers are not agreed with regard to its signification. Dr. Dwight says that it



signifies the three brothers and that it was given in allusion to its three summits. Kendall tells us that the true Indian name is Cas-cad-nac and that it means a peaked mountain with steep sides.

It has also been pointed out that the "three brothers" referred to the three deep valleys on the western side. Still another source states that the Indians called it Mahps-cad-na (possibly a corruption of Cas-cad-nac), meaning the mountain of the rocky summit.

Certain it is that the mountain, whatever it was called, must have been familiar to the Indians long before the region was settled by white men. Although no tribes are known to have lived in the immediate vicinity, this part of the Connecticut valley was a thoroughfare for the Indians who came from Canada and the Lake Champlain region to raid the Massachusetts settlements. Probably the first white people to see Ascutney Mountain were those comprising the small band of twenty captives taken during the first of the raids, in the autumn of 1677, when Hatfield was attacked. They were marched up the valley as far north as the Suaro Maug (or Squaro Maug), thought to be the present Wells River, and then across Vermont to Canada. This was only the first in a series of raids by the French and the Indians during the next thirty-five years. They traveled up the Winooski or Lamoille rivers from Lake Champlain and then down the White, Wells, and Connecticut rivers to the settlements, and in so doing must have passed and camped near Ascutney many a time.

From 1713 to 1745, there was comparative peace between the French and English colonies, and the settlements were pushed farther north along the Connecticut valley. Fort Dummer, now Brattleboro, Vermont, was established in 1724. Fort Number Four, now Charlestown, New Hampshire, twelve miles south of Ascutney, was established about 1740, but was probably abandoned and re-established in 1747. The resumption of the raids, around 1745, and later the French and Indian War between 1754 and 1760, precluded any progress in extending the settlements beyond Number Four until 1761. From that time on, settlement went forward rapidly. A survey of both banks of the Connecticut River between Bellows Falls and Wells River was made in 1760. Soon after, on the basis of the survey, six-miles-square towns were laid out, three tiers deep. Among these towns were Weathersfield, Windsor, and West Windsor, each of which includes a part of Ascutney Mountain.

It is rather pleasant to contemplate that the first constitution of the state of Vermont was written and adopted at Windsor in the shadow of Ascutney Mountain. At a convention held in Westminster in January, 1777, representatives of the inhabitants of the New Hampshire Grants had followed the course set by the Continental Congress and had published a declaration of independence by

which they considered themselves a "free and independent state." The name chosen was New Connecticut, but at a convention held in June, five months later, the name was changed to Vermont. While an application to secure the recognition of the new state by the Continental Congress was pending, and even while General Burgoyne was marching on Ticonderoga, the delegates met once again at Windsor on July 2, 1777, for the purpose of drawing up the constitution of the new state. They prepared the draft, but it came very close to not being completed. The situation is recounted by Ira Allen in his *History of Vermont*.

The convention were deliberating upon the provisions of the constitution when the intelligence of the evacuation of Ticonderoga was received. The frontiers were exposed to the inroads of the enemy. The family of the president of the convention, as well as those of many other members, were exposed to the foe. In this awful crisis, some were for leaving precipitately; but a severe thunderstorm came on, and during the rain they had time to reflect; while other members, less alarmed at the news, called the attention of the whole to finish the constitution, which was then reading for the last time. The constitution was read through; the convention proceeded to appoint a council of safety to conduct the business of the state, and adjourned without delay.

More than a century later, while serving as British Ambassador to the United States, James Bryce is reported to have stood on Windsor Rock on Ascutney and, looking down on the village, asked, "Has Windsor anything notable in its history?" On being told that Windsor was the place where the first constitution of Vermont was framed and adopted, and that this constitution was the first to prohibit slavery, he said, "That is notable indeed. Windsor should be proud of such a heritage."¹

One of the few references to Ascutney Mountain in the early records is that made by Benjamin Silliman of Yale College.² He wrote, describing Windsor:

The town has a magnificent background in the high mountain of Ascutney, measuring 3,320 feet above the sea and 2,903 feet above the surface of the river. The form of the mountain is handsome and presents naked rocks at its summit.

Two items appearing in the local paper, the *Vermont Republican and American Yeoman*, on June 6, 1825, lead us to believe that by that time the mountain might well have been climbed many times, perhaps first in the course of hunting expeditions and later as sport and for the view. The first item read as follows:

Those in this vicinity—farmers, lawyers, mechanics, and merchants—who look well to their own interests and are not averse to a little sport

¹ Henry S. Wardner, *The Birthplace of Vermont*, 1927. p. 386.

² Benjamin Silliman, *Remarks made on a short tour between Hartford and Quebec in the autumn of 1819*, 1820. p. 390.

now and then, will turn out bright and early on Friday morning next and repair to the field of action near the foot of the mountain where a

ROAD

is to be opened to the top of old

ASH-CUTNEY MOUNTAIN

Every man will bring his own tools—an axe, a shovel, hoe, crow-bar, or any other implement that may be thought useful, and luncheon, spirits, etc. to last 'til sundown—when they will be conducted to a house (comfortably furnished, all things considered) near the top of the mountain, where they will be supplied provisions and lodgings for not less than one hundred, it is expected, and for more should it be necessary.

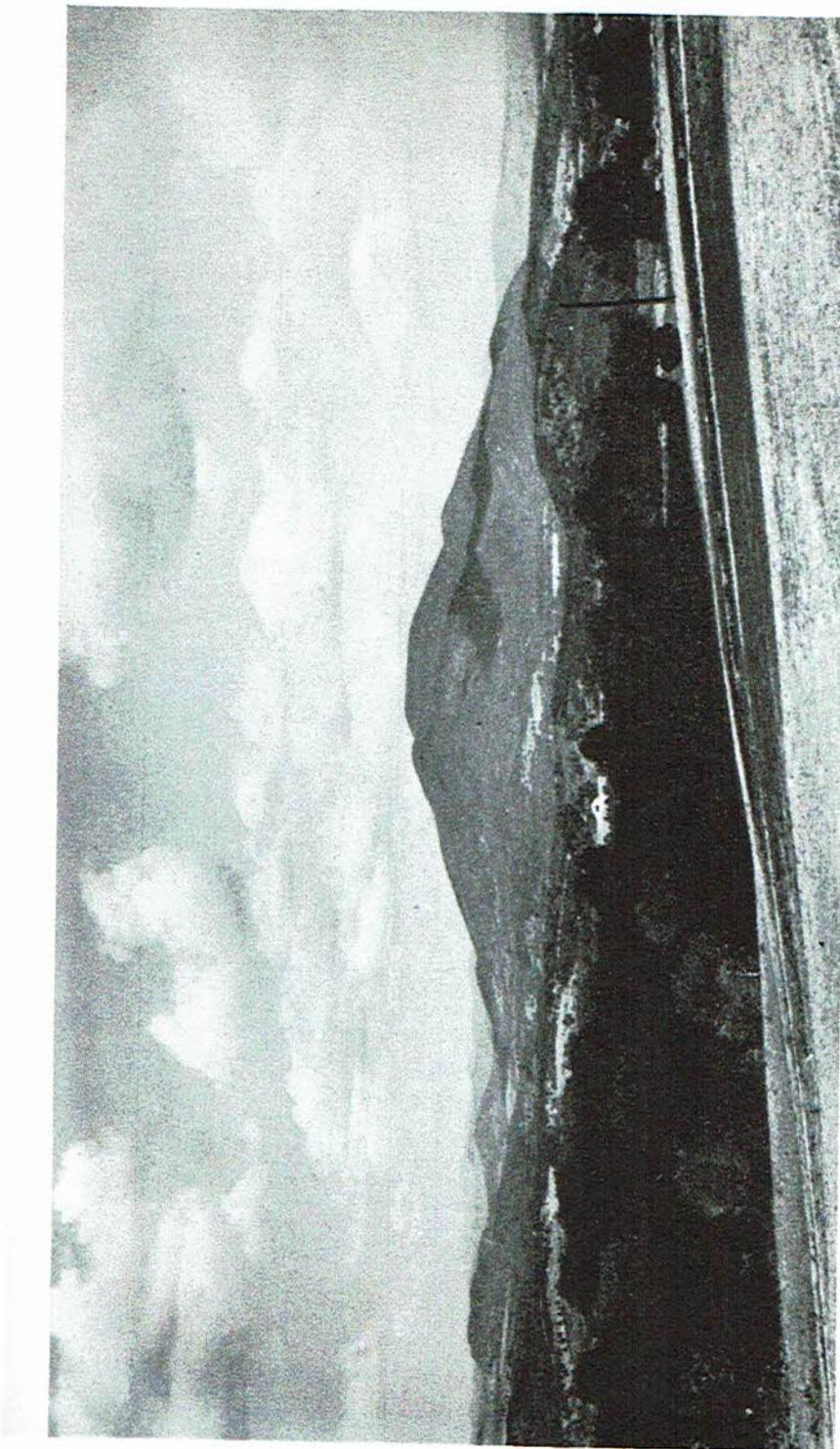
Windsor
June 4, 1825

The second item, in another column of the same issue, said that a survey would be made for a wagon road twelve to sixteen feet wide, which had been found to be practicable, so that "those persons who wish to enjoy the elegant view from the top, and who from age and other circumstances do not wish to undertake the journey on foot" may ride up. Two hundred men and boys, the military companies and inhabitants of Hartland, Plainfield, Windsor, Cornish, Weathersfield, and Claremont were invited to assist. The article went on to state:

It is expected that General Lafayette will be in this place during this or the ensuing month and we know of nothing which would give him more pleasure than to behold at one view fifty miles of the beautiful valley of the Connecticut. Being somewhat advanced in life, he would not think of undertaking the journey on foot, and we hope the liberality of the citizens of the towns above named will enable him to say that he visited one of the highest of the Green Mountains in his carriage. The inhabitants of the towns named above are requested to meet at Pettes' Coffee House on Monday the 7th inst. at 5 o'clock P.M. for the purpose of hearing the report of the surveyors and choosing a committee to superintend the work on Friday.

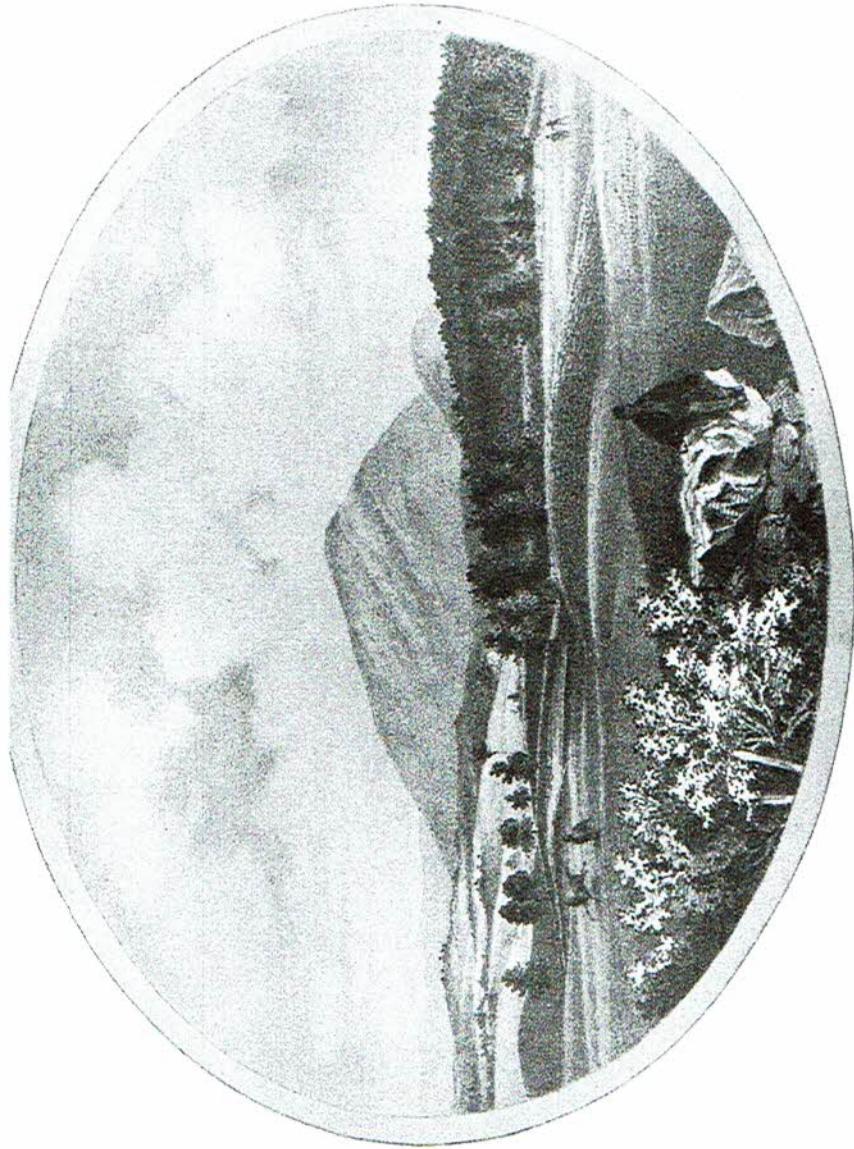
Apparently a path, probably the first on a Vermont mountain, was cut, but it is doubtful if even the roughest kind of a road was constructed. General Lafayette, then on his triumphal tour of the states, reached Windsor on June 28 at 7:30 in the morning, one day behind schedule. Arriving from Claremont, he was met at Cornish bridge by the governor of Vermont and escorted to Pettes' Coffee House, where he was entertained at dinner. His journey was resumed without his making the ascent of Ascutney.

The idea of a road to the top of Ascutney persisted, and it is next heard of in 1857. At that time D. C. Linsley surveyed a road on the northeast side of the mountain from the base to the summit, and it was built the following year. The construction of a stone house a few rods north of the summit was begun the same summer,



ASCUTNEY MOUNTAIN

Banister



ASCUTNEY MOUNTAIN FROM READING, NOW FELCHVILLE

*Lithograph from photograph by C. Miller
Report on the geology of Vermont, Published by Hager, 1861*

for in the *Vermont Journal* for August 14, 1858, the following notice appeared:

AN OLD-FASHIONED BEE

All citizens who feel an interest in the completion of the Stone House now building upon the top of Ascutney for the free use of all visitors are requested to meet at Allen Dudley's at the foot of the mountain at 7 o'clock this Saturday morning for the purpose of carrying up materials and finishing the building. The committee have been unable to raise sufficient funds to complete a work of such general interest and so necessary to render excursions to the mountain pleasant and agreeable. Every man is expected to ARM himself with an axe, a shovel, or a hoe.

Luther C. White
J. H. Simonds
A. G. Hatch
Committee

Windsor
August 7, 1858

Response to this appeal must have been sufficient, for the dedication of the stone house took place on September 4, with an attendance of approximately three hundred people, among whom were several ladies. A dinner was served, speeches were made, and music was furnished by the Windsor Cornet Band. The road was named the "Linsley Road" and the house christened the "Ascutney Summit House," although it has also been referred to as the "Tip Top House." The house, twenty by fourteen feet, was sturdily built and had a stone fireplace. In 1859, the Vermont Medical Society held one of its meetings at this Summit House. And in 1861, A. D. Hager in his *Report on the Geology of Vermont*, says:

A good road has been constructed by the enterprising citizens of Windsor, up the northeast side of the mountain where is also built a substantial "Tip Top House" for the accommodation of tourists. . . . Being so near the pleasant village of Windsor—only four miles distant to the summit, with the unequalled facilities for reaching the top—this mountain will doubtless become a favorite resort for the pleasure-seeking public at no very distant day.

Little more is heard of the road or the stone house for forty years. Daly mentions that two good trails, one from Brownsville, the other from the Windsor side, were open in 1898, but makes no reference to either the road or the house. By 1903, however, interest in both had been revived. In the autumn of that year, the old Linsley road was resurveyed by Henry S. Wardner and George A. Duncan. The sum of \$300 was contributed, which, together with an equal amount in labor, served to put the road in shape and rebuild the house. An iron roof was added and a stove installed. The work was finished so late in the fall, however, that the celebration was postponed until the next year, when several hundred people gathered on September 5, 1904, to celebrate the rebuilt house and road. This renewed interest of the people culminated, on July 22,

1905, in the organization of the Ascutney Mountain Association, a part of its constitution reading:

The association is established to preserve the natural beauty of the sides and summit of Ascutney Mountain, to cultivate a love for this mountain among the people who dwell within sight of it, and to encourage those who appreciate its charm to make this mountain a resort for pleasure and recreation.

The annual meeting of the association, held on the summit each Labor Day, became an established local feature.

In 1906, shortly after the formation of the Ascutney Mountain Association, several people from Weathersfield, led by William B. Page, blazed a trail on the south side of the mountain and built a log cabin on the southern summit, or Weathersfield peak. In this venture they were assisted by the members of the association. The cabin was very popular, particularly for use on overnight hikes, but apparently fell into disrepair and was gone by 1930. By that time, the stone house on the north summit had also fallen into disuse, and was reported to be in suitable condition only for emergency shelter. Today, the house has entirely disappeared.

Ascutney is not a difficult mountain to climb. Although three well-defined trails have been in existence for many years, one for more than a century, the slopes are not so steep, nor the ridges so precipitous that the summit could not be attained from any side. Of interest, however, is the fact that, since the trails begin at very low elevations, the vertical distance actually covered in climbing is comparable to that on mountains of much greater over-all height.

The Windsor Trail, probably the one also sometimes referred to as the Dudley Trail, starts at an elevation of 620 feet, a few hundred yards southeast of the junction of the roads from Windsor and Ascutney to Brownsville. It crosses a small pasture strewn with the rusty remains of the old sawmill that once stood there, and then turns upward along a stream. For a considerable distance the trail is broad and smooth, and it is obvious that this part of it follows the old mountain road. Remnants of the corduroy bridge over the stream are still used. As the trail ascends, however, it narrows, and evidences of the road disappear. About one and three quarters miles from the highway, a large, clear spring is a welcome sight. Shortly beyond where the trail emerges on the summit, the foundations of the old stone house can be seen. A few rods to the south, the trail is joined by the Brownsville Trail and, several rods farther on, the actual summit is reached, where a steel tower rises above the treetops and makes possible a view in all directions.

The Brownsville Trail starts from the village of Brownsville, winds up the northwest side of the mountain, and joins the Windsor Trail on the summit. About one quarter mile north of and

three hundred feet below the summit, just off the trail, is Browns-ville Rock, from which an excellent view to the north can be obtained.

The Weathersfield Trail starts at an elevation of 960 feet, four miles west of Ascutney village, and ascends the south side of the mountain. This is the trail built in 1906 by Weathersfield residents. Near this trail is Crystal Cascade, on Ascutney Brook, a beautiful sheer drop of about seventy feet.

There are numerous points on the sides of the mountain, particularly near the summit, from which excellent views in various directions may be had. Due to the broad and wooded nature of the summit, a complete panorama is not possible, except from the fire tower. In Vermont, toward the southwest, from left to right are Haystack Mt. (44 m.), Stratton Mt. (34 m.), Mt. Equinox (38 m.), Bromley Mt. (27 m.), and Mt. Tabor (27 m.). In front of and about in line with Mt. Tabor is Mt. Terrible (16 m.). Directly west and continuing to the northwest are the Okemo Mts. (16 m.), Salt Ash Mt. (16 m.), and Killington Peak (21 m.). In the farther distance, other Green Mountain summits can be seen.

Looking eastward, more than fifty miles of the Connecticut valley are visible. Beyond the valley, to the northeast, the skyline includes Mt. Moosilauke (51 m.), the Franconia Range (66 m.), Mt. Washington (84 m.), Osceola (60 m.), and of the Sandwich Range, Tripyramid (64 m.) and Chocorua (69 m.). Much nearer and to the southeast are Mt. Kearsarge (32 m.), Sunapee Mt. (24 m.), and Mt. Monadnock (44 m.). It has also been recorded, in an old diary, that, weather conditions permitting, even the ocean is in sight.

Geologically, Ascutney Mountain is a fine example of a type of rock structure which, through recent field studies, has been found to be more common in northern New England than was formerly known. That is the structure which results from an igneous rock intruding the country rock by a process known as *cauldron subsidence* or *ring-fracture stoping*.

To go back a few hundreds of millions of years, the geological story of the region began with the deposition of thousands of feet of sediments in more or less horizontal layers. The sediments were then subjected to great pressures which changed them to schists and gneisses and produced both large and small folds in the rocks. Probably during this period or somewhat later, volcanism over a rather extensive area took place which resulted in a series of volcanic rocks being deposited over the schists. From that time on, the remainder of the rocks now comprising most of Ascutney Mountain were intruded into the bedded rocks from deep within the earth's crust. Not only that, the intrusion took place and the rocks cooled and crystallized far below the surface.

But it should not be thought that the intrusion of the igneous

rocks took place at one time or resulted in a single kind of rock. First there was a dark, coarse-grained gabbro diorite. This rock is now exposed in the area around Pierson Peak and Ascutney Notch, and north of Little Ascutney Mountain, but it does not make up the actual summit of either of these peaks. Secondly, there was an intrusion of syenite, which comprises the major portion of Ascutney Mountain. The syenite is a gray, medium-grained rock closely resembling granite but differing from it in containing little or no quartz. Several varieties have been distinguished on their mineral content, but all more or less grade into one another. At the summit, the syenite is light gray; another phase known as nordmarkite, dark green in color, occurs farther down the slopes. Finally, there was an intrusion of typical, pink, medium to coarse-grained granite which is now exposed on the southeast side of the mountain. This rock has been named Conway granite, and other intrusions of it have been identified at Profile Mountain, Mt. Hitchcock, and other localities in New Hampshire. There were also a few other minor intrusions, evidenced by small outcrops which can be seen here and there in the area.

The explanation of the process by which the igneous rocks were intruded into the country rock has been of as much as, if not more interest than the determination of the rock types themselves. Daly, in his geological study at the beginning of the century, decided that the rock had gradually eaten its way upward, making way for itself by breaking off pieces of the overlying rock, rather than just filling pre-existing cavities. This process is known as *piccemeal stoping* and was generally accepted as the best explanation of the intrusion of the Ascutney syenites until 1937, when it was suggested that they might have been intruded by *forceful injection*. By this process, the country rock is pushed apart by the force of the upwelling igneous masses, thus making room for them. This suggestion led to a restudy of the field evidence and, as a result, the rejection of the theory of forceful intrusion. However, on the basis of the new evidence and new studies of New Hampshire areas, a third theory, that of cauldron subsidence, was put forth in 1940, and is considered more acceptable than that of piccemeal stoping. In this process, space is made for the intruding rock by the displacement downward of a large cylindrical block of country rock. The arc and ring-shaped outcrops of rock, so obvious on geological maps, are particularly characteristic of the process.

Long after the rock solidified, erosion eventually uncovered the intrusive rocks, and the reason that Ascutney is a mountain is because the intruded rocks are so much harder and more resistant than the sediments. The lower slopes of the mountain are the metamorphosed sediments; the upper slopes and summit the igneous rock. Ascutney is therefore an erosional monadnock.

It can be assumed, for various reasons, that glaciation had little effect on the shaping of the mountain, and that it had more or less attained its present form prior to the glacial period. Perhaps the top was rounded and polished to a certain extent by the ice, and a thin and intermittent covering of glacial drift was deposited. In addition, boulders of Ascutney bedrock were plucked off and carried on to the south, where they were eventually deposited. A well-defined "boulder train" can be traced over a fan-shaped area, extending fifty miles to the south and southeast from Ascutney as far as Bernardston, Massachusetts, and East Jaffrey, New Hampshire.

Several quarries have been opened and worked at one time or another on Ascutney Mountain. On the north slope the Norcross quarry has furnished sixteen polished columns almost twenty-five feet high for the library building which has long been the central feature of the Columbia University campus, thirty-four large columns for the Bank of Montreal, a monument to General Gomez in Cuba, and a die in the Bennington monument. The Mower quarry, on the northwest slope, one and a quarter miles south of Brownsville, was opened in 1906 and furnished the monolithic sarcophagi in the McKinley mausoleum at Canton, Ohio. "Bronze vein green," "Windsor granite," and "Green Ascutney" are commercial names which have been applied to the quarried rock. It is a hard rock with a metallic ring, has a brilliant rough surface, and takes a high polish. Blue-gray when first quarried, it turns a dark olive-green on exposure. Other quarries on the southeast side, of Conway granite, furnished blocks for the piers of the High Bridge at Claremont and for other construction in the vicinity.

The land now included in Ascutney State Forest Park, approximately 1,700 acres, was purchased in 1934. Immediately thereafter, a well-graded, paved road four miles long was built up the east slope of the mountain. The road ends about a mile short of the summit, and a trail continues on to the top. Parking areas have been constructed at intervals along the road to take advantage of the views, and recreational facilities have been provided at various places within the park. Regardless of whether the road and these facilities have "spoiled" the mountain, it is true that they have made it accessible to more people than would otherwise have been possible.

Ascutney's charm and beauty have never been questioned. Augustus St. Gaudens admired the mountain from his studio in Cornish, and Maxfield Parrish has portrayed it in his paintings. And many a traveler along the Connecticut Valley has enjoyed the sight of it without ever knowing its name. To the folk who live near it, however, and draw inspiration from its quiet and gentle demeanor, it is most of all a familiar and likable mountain. Truly, it is one of the friendliest of the Friendly Mountains.